

STILL SPEED

with Elizabeth Dungan

Dungan: *We work with being, but nonbeing is what we use,” said Lao Tzu. Considering your move to the digital format, how might *The Fourth Dimension* relate to nonbeing, or emptiness?*

Trinh: It’s great to open with Lao Tzu. Although that statement can be addressed in many ways in relation to my work, the fact that you relate it to the digital format and to *The Fourth Dimension* gives us a more specific direction.

The classic example for this I and not-I relation is that of a splendid cart whose wheels are made with a hundred spokes, and whose truth raises questions among Tao and Zen practitioners as follows: if one takes off both front and rear parts and remove the axle, then what will this grand cart be? The same question underlies the making of *The Fourth Dimension*, whose subject is not exactly Japan or Japanese culture, but the Image of Japan as mediated by the experience of “dilating and sculpting time” with a digital machine vision. What characterized the digital image is its inherent mutability—the constant movement of appearing and vanishing that underlies its formation. In today’s electronic space of computerized realities, the sage’s words would fare quite well, for one can hear in them all at once: the practical voice of ancient wisdom, the dissenting voice of postcoloniality, and the visionary voice of technology.

Paradoxically, being is not being, and nonbeing is not a negation of being. The spokes’ use for the cart is there where they are not. My work can be said to lie as much at the junction of form and content, as of form and no form. What are intensely present on screen are there actually to address specific absences. Bringing into visibility the invisible would only gain in scope and in dimension if, for example, the film takes as part of its subject of inquiry the invisible forces and relations at work in the creative process. The challenge is to find a way to let the film perform the holes, the gaps, and the specific absences by which it takes shape. Sound and silence, movement and stillness are also not opposed to one another. Silence can speak volumes, especially when it is both individual and collective. Sometimes in speech one clearly hears silence and sometimes what one says is a form of silence. Just as awareness in non-action is the texture that defines a sage’s every action, the musical quality of an instrument and its ability to resonate largely depend upon its internal emptiness.

In the visualizing of Japan, the non-Japan is constantly activated. As it is said, presence gives each event its values, but absence makes it work. For me, realizing a film in

the highly advanced technological and economical context of Japan is, in a way, to move ahead into the age of digital compositing so as to return anew to the initiatory power of “pathmaking.” (A term, as stated in the film, used in reference to the name of a Korean refugee who initially introduced the art of gardens in Japan as we know it today. The outside- or the non-Japan is here defining the inside-Japan—what we identify as characteristically Japanese). Such power can be found, for example, in the many existential arts of Japanese culture: the craft of framing time, the skill of behavior, the rites of daily activities, the way of land and water, the calligraphy of visual and architectural environment, or else the time performances of social and theatrical life.

Images of the real, produced at the speed of light, are made to play with their own reality as images. There, where new technology and ancient Asian wisdom can meet in all “artificiality” is where what is viewed as the objective reality underneath the uncertain world of appearance proves to be no more no less than a reality effect—or better, a being time. With digital systems taking part in our everyday thought and work, and with the advent of virtual reality, we are witnessing a profound reality shift, one that radically impacts upon the foundations of our knowledge, and upon our perception of the world.

D: *Your response, and your attentiveness to presence and absence, seems to resonate with the very process of digitalization: a translation into a series of zeros and ones, or “on and off.” The underlying foundation of 01010101 relates to these productive couplings of being and nonbeing, absence and presence. In fact, with the digital medium, one can never isolate a “still” image: the image seen on screen is always “in the making” or always incomplete—partially present and partially absent. You’ve written elsewhere about the cinema’s limits. How might The Fourth Dimension transcend, resist, or revise these limits? Can you describe, for example, the role of color in your digital work?*

T: I’ve spoken at length on the limits of established categories in cinema. These categories—narrative, documentary, experimental—define the way a film is made and received, and hence its limits. Rather than coming back to these, I will expand a bit on the limits of the visual, the verbal and the musical that constitute cinema’s fabric. Although these three realms are tightly related in my films and are created with similar principles and concerns, they also remain independent in their processes. In deciding “what cinema is all about,” any tendency to favor one of these realms over the other and to establish a relation of domination in which ear, mouth or hand is subordinated to eye, for example, would precipitate one’s encounter with the medium’s limits—if one works intimately with it. The question then is not so much to transcend as to discern them, so as to work with each of them independently and interactively. And the challenge is to operate right at the edge of what is and what no longer is “cinema.”

Cinema is commonly thought of as being essentially visual. As it is practiced in the film industry and in the experimental arena, digital cinema tends to reinforce such a definition, even though the two milieux may differ radically in their eye-dominant treatment of film. On the one hand, you have the story-image—an image *re-produced* so as to advance the plot or to illustrate the story most efficaciously—and on the other, you have the painting-image—an image activated in its plastic form, or *de-formed* and made unrecognizable so as to claim its status as pure vision. Steeped in photographic